DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 162 SO 015 780

AUTHOR Hahn, Carole L.
TITLE Teaching Controversial Issues: The Case of Peace and Security.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium and the Bundeszentrale fur politische Bildung (Irsee, Bavaria, West Germany, June 18-22, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Freedom; Censorship; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Critical Thinking; Educational Environment; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Moral Issues; *National Security; Nuclear Warfare; *Peace; Public Schools; School Role; Social Studies; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Issues concerning world peace and security, as well as other controversial issues, should receive more attention in the school curriculum. An increasing number of studies on student perceptions of war and peace consistently suggest that students are acutely aware of the nuclear threat. Moreover, student knowledge about war-related issues increases with age, television viewing, newspaper reading, and parental expression about the issues. American schools today avoid controversial issues in general and the nuclear issue in particular due to the growing self-censorship on the part of teachers, administrators, and publishers who fear public criticism. The research, however, suggests that if educators want students to develop attitudes that are supportive of democracy, then they must be given practice in examining controversial issues. Teachers need moral support, advice on handling controversial issues, well-balanced information and materials on nuclear arms control, and reassurance of their legal protection in the use of controversial materials and techniques. For each public policy issue, students should consider the possible consequences and various alternatives and arrive at their own decisions in light of their knowledge and values. Students will not only acquire a better understanding of a particular issue, they will also develop analytic abilities, decision-making skills, and democratic values. (LH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Carole L. Hahn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED247162

Teaching Controversial Issues:

The Case of Peace and Security

Carole L. Hahn
Educational Studies Division
Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia 30322 - U.S.A.

Paper presented to a joint meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium and the Bundeszentrale fur Politische Bildung. Irsee, Bavaria, Germany June 18-22, 1984.

SO 015 780

Teaching Controversial Issues:

The Case of Peace and Security

Each semester I ask my classes of teachers to interview students about what are the biggest problems facing the world today. This year, the students responded with answers such as crime, drugs, inflation, nuclear war, and unemployment. Whether they were in the third grade or in high school, youth repeatedly cited economic problems and the nuclear threat. So the topics of this conference are clearly on the minds of our students at a time when the schools (at least in the United States) are doing little to help youth understand, much less solve, the pressing problems of our global society.

I submit that peace and security issues ought to receive much more attention in our curriculum. Further, I believe that the method is as important as the content; students must analyze alternative positions, not merely absorb one-sided presentations. Before I elaborate on what ought to be in regard to nuclear education, I will describe the current status of the issue with respect to students, curriculum, and educational climate in the U.S. today.

What Is

Student Perceptions of War and Peace

One highly publicized study in the United States (Beardslee and Mack, 1982) found that 40% of the 1100 students interviewed said they were aware of nuclear developments before they were 12 years old. A majority of the respondents said that they felt civil defense would not work, that the nuclear threat affected their plans for the future, and that nuclear advances affected their daily thoughts and feelings. Summaries of other research on high school students also conclude that the nuclear threat affects students thinking about the future (Mack, 1984).

While there is criticism of particular studies for poor sample selection or researcher bias, the various studies of students' perceptions of war and peace have consistently identified the following: feelings of powerlessness, beliefs that the threat of nuclear war is increasing, and doubts that there will be the opportunity to grow up. Further, several studies have found that most students lack factual knowledge about nuclear arms. The consistent findings across studies (Beardslee & Mack, 1983; Mack, 1984) and informal reports suggest the hypothesis that students are acutely aware of the nuclear threat--in spite of the

school's avoidance of the topic. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that youth today are any more pacifistic than their parents, nor any more peace-oriented than their fellow students in earlier time periods.

Howard Tolley's 1971 study of children's attitudes toward war in general, and toward the Vietnam War in particular, suggest additional hypotheses for contemporary study. Nearly all of the 7 to 13-year-old children interviewed believed that wars are "very, very bad"; yet, half felt that wars were necessary sometimes. Further, about half felt that all people should be willing to die for their country's freedom. Ninety-one percent of the children felt that stopping war is "hard" or "very, very hard", and the older children were more certain than the younger ones that war would recur. Children who were in elementary school during the time of the Vietnam War probably thought of war in terms of the conventional weapons they saw on the nightly television programs, in war movies, and in their history textbooks. To American students in 1971 war was horrible, but sometimes it was necessary. Further, war was likely to occur again in the future. Similar findings were obtained in recent studies of students attitudes toward nuclear war (Beardslee & Mack, 1983).

At the time of Tolley's survey, the United States' role in Vietnam was a controversial issue which divided society--even more than is the freeze issue which divides us today. Tolley's findings may, thus, offer us further insights into our current situation. He found that half of the children opposed United States involvement in Vietnam, opposition increased with age, and attitudes toward the Vietnam War correlated with students' perceptions of their parents attitudes toward it. The strongest predictors of specific knowledge about the war were age, television viewing, newspaper reading, and parental expression of attitudes toward the war. There was no relationship between knowledge and gender.

The fact that parents were more influential in the development of their children's attitudes and knowledge about the Vietnam War than were schools contrasted with earlier political socialization literature. The earlier studies measured students' views of the national government and general beliefs about political life--topics which the schools address. Tolley's study dealt with a specific controversial issue of the kind schools avoid. In fact, only half of the teachers of the children in this study said that they had spent even one lesson on Vietnan since the war had begun; not surprisingly, the children reported that they learned little about Vietnam in school (they regarded television as their most important source of information). The researcher further noted that many of the schools which

were originally selected for his study declined to participate precisely because the research dealt with the Vietnam War--a controversial issue.

Taken together, the earlier research on children's attitudes toward war and the recent studies on students' fears of a nuclear holocaust suggest that youth believe a nuclear war is both frightening and likely to occur. Further, student knowledge about a war-related issue increases with age, television viewing, newspapers reading, and parental expression about the issue. Those are the perceptions of students, now what of the schools?

School Curriculum

Just as American schools were quiet about the controversial Vietnam War issue 15 years ago, today they are saying little about the nuclear threat and issues of peace and security. A month ago I sent a questionnaire to the 50 state-level social studies consultants to ascertain the status of nuclear education in the United States. Most of the respondents reported that only "some" or "a few" social studies teachers were dealing with the subject of nuclear arms. The consultants believed that the absence of discussion about nuclear issues was primarily due to teachers' lack of knowledge about the topic, teachers perceptions that the topic did not fit the existing curriculum, the scarity of appropriate materials, and the fear that parents or administrators might object. A second item on the questionnaire further suggested that teachers avoid talking about the nuclear issue because they perceive that it is a controversial issue which might stimulate objections. Most of the respondents agreed with the statement "a teacher who teaches about nuclear war should anticipate criticism from parents and administrators."

Now let us look at what is going on in the few classes which do teach about nuclear war, arms control, and security. A second survey I conducted recently used a sample of secondary classroom teachers who belong to the National Council for the Social Studies. Those teachers who do teach about nuclear issues said their goals were to create an awareness of the seriousness of the arms race and the nuclear threat, to help students to see several sides of the issues, and to give students practice in decision making and taking a stand. Several teachers said that they found student apathy and denial frustrating. As one teacher explained, "my biggest problem is getting students to realize how important it is to get involved, to care."

Both teachers and state consultants expressed a need for balanced instructional materials which present different views on the issues; they complained that most available

materials present a single point of view. Most often, instructional units are designed by the individual teacher using articles from newspapers and magazines. The commercial materials which are in widest use are those produced by the Arms Control Association, Educators for Social Responsibility, Ground Zero, and the National Education Association.[1] Several teachers in the survey said that they showed a videotape of "The Day After" to their students and movies from various sources.

Climate of Censorship

In addition to considering the status of peace and security education in terms of classroom instruction about nuclear issues and student perceptions of such issues, we must also consider the climate in which the topic is being treated--or more frequently, avoided. The tendency of teachers to avoid controversial issues, which was noted by the supervisors, is neither new nor irrational. Over the years, various studies have concluded that teachers do not feel free to include controversial issues in their classrooms (Ehman, 1978). "Closed areas" which are often avoided today include school prayer, creationism/evolution, and the proposed nuclear freeze (Hahn, 1984).

Last year in another survey of social studies specialists in the 50 states, I tried to find out as much as I could about the status of social studies. Several items on the questionnaire related to controversial issues and academic freedom. Repeatedly, respondents from all across the country said: "We haven't had any incidents lately... probably because teachers are staying away from anything controversial." With budget cuts, dropping enrollments, and reductions in force, teachers are being extra careful not to "make waves." Apparently, one of the intangible costs of the current economic situation in the United States is that more than ever before, teachers are "playing it safe."

Teachers are not alone. Their self-censorship is often encouraged by school boards and administrators. In my own county, principals tell teachers to "stay away from values" (as if that were even possible). In addition, authors and publishers of school textbooks leave out potentially controversial material in fear of possible protests.

I do not mean to suggest that the fears of teachers, administrators, and publishers are unwarranted. They are not. Protests are frequent and they are growing. The American Library Association estimated that in 1978-79 there were 5 incidents per day, and that since 1981, they have increased to 3 times that! Another survey estimates that one out of every 5 schools in the United States has experienced a censorship challenge.[2] Social studies

textbooks, global education programs, and values clarification lessons have been attacked. Given this climate, it is little wonder that teachers are not eager to teach about nuclear issues.

So far I have described what <u>is</u> in terms of student perceptions, classroom instruction, and the general educational climate. I would like to turn now to what I believe ought to be--open reflective inquiry into controversial issues of peace and security.

What Ought to Be

Philosophic Rationale

I subscribe to a philosophic tradition in social studies education which proclaims that the role of citizenship education in a democracy is to give students practice in examining the closed, controversial issues of society. Anything less would be to adopt totalitarian practices. That position was articulated in the 1940's by Alan Griffin. (Griffin, 1942) Later Maurice Hunt, Lawrence Metcalf, (1968) and others[3] followed with suggested teaching methods and curriculum materials which emphasized that the essential role of citizenship education within a democratic context is to give youth practice in reflective inquiry into and decision making about the controversial issues facing society.

It is that position which guides the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). As early as 1950, the NCSS Board of Directors adopted the following position:

> The National Council for the Social Studies recommends that it be the explicit policy of the nation's public schools to encourage and maintain the study of the unsolved problems and the current, controversial issues of our society. Only through this study can children develop the abilities they will need as citizens of a democracy--to analyze a problem, to gather and organize facts, to discriminate between fact and opinion, to draw intelligent conclusions, and to accept the principle of majority rule with due respect to minorities. The school has the responsibility for helping every boy and girl to develop and to apply these abilities. Hence, the school must uphold the freedom to learn (Cox, 1977).

Over the past 30 years, NCSS position statements have consistently reaffirmed both the student's freedom to learn and the teacher's freedom to teach about controversial issues.

Empirical Support

Recently, the philosophic commitment which I have been describing has been reinforced by empirical evidence. In their cross-national study of civic learning in nine nations, Torney, Oppenheim, and Farnen (1975) concluded that students are more politically knowledgeable, more politically interested, and less authoritarian if they regularly participate in classroom discussions in which they are encouraged to express their opinions. Students who passively receive their civic instruction solely in the form of lectures and recitation tend to be more authoritarian (Torney, et al., 1975).

Similar findings were obtained in research on high school students in the United States. Grossman (1974) found that tolerance of dissent among high school students was positively related to students' perception of their freedom to express views in class and to the number of courses taken in which controversial issues were regularly discussed. In a two-year longitudinal study, Ehman (1970, 1972) found that in the few social studies classes in which controversial issues were discussed in a "normative" mode, students were more likely to exhibit positive attitudinal changes in terms of political cynicism and efficacy than their peers.

In a second longitudinal study Ehman (1977) found that the extent to which controversial issues were studied in high social social studies classes was positively correlated with students' feelings of social trust, social integration, political confidence, and political interest. When more than one side of an issue was examined and students felt free to express their opinions, students demonstrated an increased sense of social trust, social integration, political confidence, and political interest.

Most recently, I conducted a study in which high school history classes discussed controversial issues one day a week over a ten week quarter. The students in the classes which had structured value analysis discussions of controversial issues showed gains in political confidence, political interest, and social integration as compared with the students in classes which did not discuss controversial issues and and those in classes which did not use a value analysis approach to the discussion of issues. In fact, students in classes in which the same news stories were discussed but without consideration of alternative points of view--the dimension that makes an issue controversial--scored the lowest on measures of political interest and social integration. By taking the controversy out of a topic, instruction apparently killed whatever natural interest students bring to the classroom.

Taken together, the research suggests if we want students to develop attitudes which are supportive of democracy, then we must give them practice in examining controversial issues. It is not sufficient merely to provide students with information and ask them to recall facts about the history of the arms race and arms control agreements. Nor is it appropriate to indoctrinate students to support or oppose a nuclear freeze. To develop democratic attitudes, students must weigh the possible consequences of alternative positions, and they must have the opportunity to freely express their opinions. Further, the rationale for social studies as democratic citizenship education requires that students practice open inquiry into controversial issues; anything less would be hypocrisy.

Yet as I write this, I know that social studies educators in the United States are avoiding controversial issues--including issues related to peace and security.

We must realize that teachers have reasons to be hesistant, and we must give them moral support and advice on how to handle controversial issues, in addition to providing information and materials on nuclear arms control. In the United States, too few teachers realize that the courts have protected the teachers' use of controversial materials and techniques so long as it could be demonstrated that the actions met the following criteria: relevant to the subject being taught, appropriate for the age and maturity of the students, not disruptive to school or classroom discipline, and had the support of the teacher's profession (Ochoa, 1979). The latter criteria suggests that it is particularly important for teachers to be aware of the series of NCSS position statements that advise teachers to present materials, speakers, and information from various viewpoints and not to use the classroom as a forum for their own ideology. Teachers who act as catalysts encouraging students to examine all sides of an issue will be supported by their professional organization and, given the precedents, most likely by the courts.

I was interested to see the responses of both the social studies supervisors and the classroom teachers in my surveys to the questions: What do you think should be the goals, or purposes of nuclear education in social studies? What advice would you give to teachers who are considering teaching the topic? Almost all of the respondents said that the goals should be to inform students about the issues and to give students opportunities to explore and form opinions after hearing all sides. Almost uniformly their advice to teachers was to "be balanced . . . present information with fair treatment of varying viewpoints."

The tasks of developing materials, of training teachers, and of planning classroom instruction on peace and security is particularly difficult because it is not a single issue and there are not only two sides. Even the language we use is debateable: should students experience "peace education", "nuclear education", or "disarmament education?" Should they study about the "nuclear threat", "arms control", "national security", or "real global security?" In his new book Weapons and Hope, Freeman Dyson (1984) reminds us that even among those people who agree that the arms race should be stopped, there is disagreement over the means to the end, and the groups cannot talk to or understand one another because they speak different languages and use different images. Is it possible to present to students the very different perspectives of Dyson's "warrior culture" and "victim culture" when adults cannot comprehend the differences? There are different perspectives within governments, within armies, and within the civilian populations of each country. There are also different perspectives among nations and among groups which cross national boundaries. In addition, as Elizabeth Dodson-Gray (1983) has suggested, the patriarchal conception of society and of human society to the planet limits our views of nuclear and other global issues. Carol Gilligan's (1982) research on moral reasoning also suggests that females may reason differently than males about nuclear issues, just as they seem to about other ethical dilemmas.

Clearly, it is not possible to present all sides when all sides are not even known. Nor is it realistic to expect students to completely understand issues that are so complex "experts" cannot comprehend them. But it is essential that we try our best to present multiple perspectives on multiple issues. For each public policy issue, students ought to consider the possible consequences of various alternatives, and arrive at their own decisions in light of their knowledge and values. In the process, students will not only acquire a better understanding of that particular issue but they will also develop analytic abilities decision-making skills, and democratic attitudes The survival of both our planet and of our democracy, then, are tied to how we teach our youth about this most important of controversial issues.

References

Beardslee, W. R. & Mack J. E. (1982). The impact on children and adolescents of nuclear developments. In Psychosocial Aspects of Nuclear Developments, Task Force Report Number 20. Washington, DC:

Beardslee, W. R. & Mack, J. E. (1983). Adolescents and the threat of nuclear war: The evolution of a perspective. The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine. 56, 79-91.

Cox, B. (1977). The censorship game and how to play it. Washington, DC: The National Council for the Social Studies.

Dodson-Gray, E. (1983). Patriachy as conceptual trap. Roundtable Press.

Dyson, F. (1983). Weapons and hope. New York: Harper & Row.

Ehman, L. H. (1970). Normative discourse and attitude change in the social studies classroom. High School Journal, 54, 76-83.

Ehman, L. H. (1972). Political efficacy and the high school social studies curriculum. In B. G. Massialas (Ed.), Political youth, traditional schools: National and international perspectives. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 90-112.

Ehman, L. H. (1977, April). Social studies instructional factors causing change in high school student's sociopolitical attitudes over a two-year period. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Ehman, L. (1978). Research on values (chapter 4). In F. Hunkins et al. Review of Research 1975-77. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

Ehman, L. H. (1980). The American high school in the political socialization process. Review of Educational Research, 50(1), 99-119.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Griffin, A. F. (1942). A philosophical approach to the subject matter preparation of teachers of history. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University.

Hahn, C. L. (1984 Fall). The status of the social studies. Social Education.

Hahn, C. L., & Avery, P. (1984, April). Value analysis, political attitudes, and reading comprehension: Are they related?. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Hunt, M. P., & Metcalf, L. E. (1968). Teaching high school social studies. New York: Harper & Row.

Mack, J. E. (1984, Winter) Research on the impact of the nuclear arms race on children in the U.S.A. Reprinted from from IPPNW Report, 2. MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

Ochoa, A. (1979, April). Presidential address. Social Education.

Tolley, H. (1973). Children and war: Political socialization to international conflict. New York: Teachers College Press.

Torney, J. V., Oppenheim, A. N., & Farnen, R. F. (1975). Civic education in ten countries. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

* * * * *

Footnotes

[1]Most of these and other materials and organizations along with their perspectives have been described by James Becker in his paper Reflections On a Variety of School Approaches to War and Peace--available from the Social Studies Development Center, 2805 East 10th Street Bloomington, IN 47401.

[2]Data on censorship incidents obtained from National Coalition Against Censorship, 132 West 43 Street, New York, N.Y. 10036.

[3]Shirley Engle, Fred Newmann, Donald Oliver, and James Shaver have written in this tradition.